

resource guide

for parents and guardians to prevent underage drinking



Start talking BEFORE they start drinking.

Dear Parents, Guardians, Coaches and Friends,

Starting middle school can be an exciting and challenging time for kids – and for parents! The good news is that Cambridge tracks trends in health risks and behaviors among middle school and high school students. This information helps us develop programs and services where they are most needed.

In 2009, for example, 1 in 3 Cambridge middle school students had started drinking by the end of eighth grade. While there is still work to be done, 2012 data show that statistic has come down to 1 in 4 students. Way to go, parents!

This Reality Check guide was created for parents, guardians and all adults who work with tweens, teens and young adults. It's full of information to help you make the difference in the life of your loved young one. These tips are great for learning how to talk with your kids about alcohol, but can also be used to start a conversation about drugs, sex, and other topics that young people deal with at this stage of life. The key is communication; talk early and talk often! Check out some of the advice from Cambridge teens and tweens, too (see page 11).

We would love you hear from you. Please let us know your thoughts, opinions and suggestions on this guide and on making the difference in the lives of Cambridge youth. You can contact us at kormond@cambridgema.gov.

Sincerely,

Keisha Ormond Cambridge Prevention Coalition

Kim DeAndrade Cambridge Public Schools

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Middle School Matters!

Your child may be experiencing a lot of new changes as she reaches the tween years. No longer a child, but not quite yet a teen, she is navigating new classes in school, new friends, a changing body and new health risks, including access to alcohol.

Did you know alcohol use increases with age? That means that talking about alcohol is more effective before kids start drinking. In fact, delaying alcohol and drug use until the age of 21 reduces the likelihood that your child might face alcohol abuse or dependence later in life. (Source: Watertown Youth Coalition)

In 2009, 1 in 3 Cambridge youth had used alcohol by the end of 8th grade. The good news is that by 2011, that number dropped to 1 in 4 Cambridge youth.

However, 1 in 4 is still too many. A child's brain continues to develop well into adulthood – about age 25. The part of the brain that is important to long-term memory, the hippocampus, is about 10% smaller in heavy teen drinkers. Young drinkers have more long-term memory impairment. (Dr. Traci Brooks, Cambridge Health Alliance).

According to Cambridge data, we know that 60% of middle school students who received mostly F's reported drinking alcohol in the last 30 days. Thirty-three percent of middle school students who drank reported having sex. Only 5 percent of students who did not drink reported having sex.

Middle school is challenging enough. Don't add alcohol to the mix.

Meet Chandra, Reality Check Parent # of kids: 2

Why is it important to talk to your kids about alcohol now?

"I believe that it is learned behavior. The earlier you start teaching, the more they'll learn. You want them to be comfortable and confident. Confidence is the key. You have to feel like you can do it. Working with students has prepared me to talk to my kids."



Parents make the difference!

Start a conversation with your tween.

It can be hard to talk about alcohol, no matter what your child's age. But talking is important. Parents, role models, coaches, community members, grandparents - we all have a responsibility to keep our children safe.

Start off by watching TV together. Use a recent news item or story line as a reference and ask what your child and his or her friends think about the issue. Listen and be respectful. It might be hard for your child to explain her position if she feels that you already have a right or wrong answer waiting.

Prepare your child.

Start the talk and keep it going. Talking about alcohol or other difficult topics means many ongoing conversations. Create the space for both of you to talk, and let your child do much of the talking. Ask questions and show that you're listening and hearing what your tween or teen is saying.

Stay open-minded and supportive.

You can never tell your child that you love him or her too much. You can use that love to open the conversation and let him or her know that you won't get angry if you both are honest and willing to learn from each other.

Don't be judgmental.

It goes hand in hand with being open-minded, but try not to jump to conclusions. You can try asking your son to walk you through a decision he's made or will be making.

Admit your mistakes.

Many parents worry about their own early introduction to alcohol or drugs. Be honest with your child and tell the truth. You can admit your

mistakes and turn the discussion back to your teen. You might try, "This isn't about me. It's about you and making sure that you are safe."

Be clear.

Make sure your child knows that you do not want him or her using alcohol or drugs. Talk about why, including the risks of using either.

Talk through boundaries.

Talk about and agree on boundaries like curfew and privacy. Once agreed upon, these boundaries need to be respected. Be sure your teen is following them and stay true to them yourself.

Set reasonable consequences.

When boundaries are broken, the consequences need to be consistently enforced. But these consequences also need to be reasonable. Setting punishments that are too harsh or severe can undermine your relationship and all of the progress you're trying to make.

Create a safe word.

Many parents use a safe word or phrase that a teen can use while they're out with peers. Texting this phrase (or saying it over the phone) lets you know that he or she needs your help getting out of a tough situation.

Practice, practice, practice.

Keep talking with your teen and practice how she might handle tough situations. You can walk through how or when she might be asked to use alcohol or drugs and together, you can work through how to respond. Show that you understand how difficult these situations are.



No. 12: Teens who learn anti-drug messages at home are 42% less likely to use drugs.



Conversation Starters

Feeling at a loss on how to start the conversation? Here are a few to try:

"Did you hear that story on the news? What did you think?"

"I found this bottle in your bag. Can we talk about how it got there? What would you do differently next time?"

"It seems like that character wasn't ready to do X. Is this happening in your school? How do your classmates handle situations like this?"

"What do you think is a reasonable curfew? What should happen if you're not home on time?"

Talk about peer pressure before the party. Talk through potential tricky situations and how to respond.

Access to Alcohol

My kid doesn't drink, right...? Actually, most middle school kids in Cambridge who drink access alcohol from home.

While most parents don't willingly give their children alcohol, any alcohol that is not locked up is easy for most kids to find, drink and share. Monitor what you have at home. Know how much you have and where you keep it. Keep it locked in a cabinet or where no one else can access it, including the basement or the garage.



When you talk to your tween about alcohol use in your home, make sure they know the reason you're locking it up or monitoring it is not because because you want to protect them, not because you don't trust them. You may have a trusting relationship with your child, but if their friends are visiting or spending the night at your house, peer pressure can be hard to resist.

Reality Check:

Of Cambridge middle school students who report drinking, 13% got it from home without anyone knowing, 17% got it from another adult, 17% got it from another underage student and 25% got it from a parent. (Source: 2009 Middle Grades Health Survey)

Shoulder Tapping

One of the common ways that adolescents get alcohol is by shoulder tapping or "hey mister." Shoulder tapping is when an underage youth stands outside of a location that sells liquor and asks someone going in to purchase alcohol for them. In Massachusetts, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) found that 83 of 100 adults asked to buy alcohol for minors did so.



No. 15: Alcohol use can lead to risky behaviors. Cambridge kids who drank in the last 30 days were more likely to also report having been in a car where they believed the driver of the car was drunk.

Parents may think they'd rather have their kids and their kids' friends drinking in their home, but parents should be aware of the serious legal risks involved. In Massachusetts, parents and their children alike may face:

Criminal Prosecution

As a parent, you can be hit with criminal penalties – as much as a \$2,000 fine and a year of jail time – for knowingly giving alcohol to an underage person, other than your children or grandchildren, in your home. Your child can also face these criminal penalties for giving alcohol to an underage friend in the family home.

underage or not) and that guest harms someone else as a result (for instance, by getting behind the wheel and causing an accident), you can be sued for a potentially huge sum of money to compensate the victim or, if the victim was killed, the victim's family. Your child can face this so-called social host liability, as well.

A Civil Lawsuit

If you host a social gathering and give too much alcohol to a guest (whether that guest is

* This section was adapted from Katharine M. Felluca, an attorney at the law firm of Clark, Hunt, Ahern & Embry in Cambridge. The information presented in this section should neither be construed as formal legal advice nor the creation of an attorney-client relationship.



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Talking with other parents

Parenting isn't always easy, and sometimes it feels like there are never enough hours in the day to accomplish your work, finish laundry, help with homework and run to practice. And just as important as having a conversation with your child is having a conversation with other parents, too. Talking with other parents can help open up the lines of communication, giving you both support and another view of your child's world.

Moreover, these open lines of communication with other parents can be helpful when you have to talk about something you have seen or heard about someone else's child. It can be difficult to raise your voice, but even this conversation is critical. If you find yourself in that situation, here are some suggestions on how to raise sensitive issues with a parent you may not know very well.

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- Don't be judgmental. If you have witnessed another parent's child with alcohol, don't pass judgment on the parent or child. You may have some of the facts, but it's hard to know everything.
- Admit that this can be awkward. Bringing up sensitive situations is hard. But reinforce the fact that you are telling him or her because you think it is his or her business.
- Find a way to communicate when others aren't around. It may be easiest to do so over e-mail or a private message on Facebook.
- Keep the information away from other parents and/or children.
- Be gentle! Remember this can be tough for any parent to hear. You especially don't want to come across accusatory.
- Be honest. Don't hide what you have seen or know, but also admit what you don't know for sure.
- Never appear to be gossiping. Always be genuine.

Do you have other thoughts or advice? Don't be afraid to open up and talk with other parents or guardians. The key is to open up the lines of communication.



What to say...A sample letter to other parents

Maybe you're hosting a party or a get together for your son's sports team. Whatever the case, reaching out to other parents and guardians before the event can go a long way in easing fears and opening up the lines of communication. Below is a sample letter from a Cambridge parent that you can modify for your own use.

Dear Parents,

As I am sure you have heard by now, my child has invited your son/daughter to a party at my home on April 12th. I am writing to introduce myself. My name is Susan Jones and I live at 123 Main Street. I have discussed some safety precautions and guidelines with my son/daughter, and want to let you know what I expect of our teens, so that we can all enjoy the party with as few worries as possible.

- * Only those invited (who are on the list) will be permitted to stay.
- * If your son/daughter wishes to leave, s/he must inform me of their plans. I want to know who is at my house at all times. I will ask where they are planning to go, and will ask them to call you with that information.
- * No one is permitted to drive from my house. (Give taxi or public transportation options if appropriate.)

I will provide hearty snacks and beverages (non-alcoholic, of course!). I think our kids will be hungry and will have a great time!

Please feel free to call or email me with any questions! Lastly, I look forward to meeting your child!

Sincerely,

Susan Jones suejones@suejones.com

Parenting Help

Parents do make the difference, but your child's world is probably very different from the one you grew up with. Thinking about those differences can help, as can these strategies:

Get hip to technology

If your teen teases you about your old cell phone or attempts at learning Facebook, it might be a good idea to take a crash course in technology. See "Crash Course for Parents" from Parents. The Anti-Drug (www.theantidrug.com).

Take inventory at home

Limit the access that your child has to alcohol and other drugs at home. Is your liquor cabinet stocked and unlocked? Is your medicine cabinet full of prescription drugs? Monitor what you have and don't be afraid to lock it up. If you need to dispose of unused prescriptions, you can mix them with kitty litter or used coffee grinds

and throw it in the trash. Cambridge often holds Prescription Drug Take Back Days through the police department. Talk to other members of your household about the importance of not giving your child alcohol before 21.

Stay in touch with other parents

If your child is going to a party or event, find out if there will be another parent there to supervise. Contact that parent and make sure no alcohol will be available there.

Reinforce and model good behavior

Acknowledge when your teen makes good decisions and show your love for her. When she has a lapse in judgment, be clear that it's the behavior, not the teen that you're unhappy with. Talk with your teen about decisions you make and be responsible.





No. 23: Middle school students in Cambridge are more likely to drink if they believe their parents think it is not at all wrong for them to do so.

Teens Say...

The Cambridge Prevention Coalition has worked with many Cambridge youth and families over the years, and knows how strong and challenging these relationships can be. Over that time, we've collected many insights from teens. See what they have to say and how that might apply to you.

"Treat us with respect."

"A good time to talk is in the car, after a certain news item or song plays on the radio."

"Some parents don't know their kids drink, or that parents are the source of the alcohol. They need awareness so they can take precautions."

"Don't make assumptions."

"Teens need parents to be more active and to offer more activities so teens won't get drowned with boredom, and decide, 'Hey, there's nothing to do. I'll just drink.'"

"Don't just talk 'at' me, talk with me."

"My parents are very good making sure alcohol at parties is off-limits. They know what could happen."

"If I make a mistake, don't just yell at me. If I break curfew or do something you don't approve of, have a serious conversation a few hours after the event (like the morning after), but tell me that we will be talking more about this."

"Remind me you love me."

Meet Kathy, Reality Check Parent # of kids: 1

Who are parents that you admire and why?

"My brother and sister in law. They have a 23 year-old, and I think they did a great job preparing her for the world...I thought they struck a really excellent balance between allowing her her autonomy but making sure she felt secure and safe. It was their honesty and directness, and setting boundaries, and knowing when to let go."





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Need Help Now?

Call the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Helpline at 1-800-327-5050 or call SAMHSA's 24/7 crisis line at 1-800-662-HELP



Reality Check

Reality Check is a social marketing campaign to reduce underage drinking among middle school students. The campaign focuses on helping parents limit access to alcohol in the home and strengthening communication and trust between parents and their children. Developed by the Cambridge Prevention Coalition in partnership with the Cambridge Public Health Department. www.RealityCheckWorks.org